

Suprastructure

A Photo Exhibition

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A Photo Exhibition

The photo exhibition 'Suprastructure' was first displayed at Museum Gustavianum in Uppsala between 17 November 2012 and 5 March 2013. It was digitally published in March 2013 as part of a research project entitled 'Infrastructure as Divination: Urban Life in the Postcolony,' financed by the Swedish Research Council.

The scholars behind the exhibition, Ulrika and Erik Trovalla, are researchers in cultural anthropology and ethnology. They are based at the Nordic Africa Institute, Uppsala, and Uppsala University. Drawing on their photographs from the million city Jos in central Nigeria, they here give a glimpse of their research into the meanings of infrastructure in everyday life.

At the same time as African cities are increasingly being shaped by new technology – cellular phones, mobile internet access, solar energy, satellites, etc. – many of them are also characterised by an infrastructure marked by advanced decay and uncertainty. Inhabitants live with constant failures in the flows of electricity, water, telecommunications, fuel, traffic, etc.

The term 'infrastructure' conjures images of systems that function unobtrusively in the background. 'Infra' means *below*, and so the infrastructure is expected to transport water, sewage, waste, energy, goods and people, without the need for anyone to be aware of it.

But through its failures, infrastructure has moved from the background to the foreground of experience, and become a factor that increasingly structures everyday life. In short, *'infrastructure' has become 'suprastructure.'*



Image # 1: Water reservoirs and telecommunications masts in Tudun Wada, Jos.

The Qualities of Energy

Many areas in Jos receive power only a few minutes or hours at a time, after days or even weeks of darkness. When the power finally returns, it is sometimes too weak to charge even a mobile phone. At other times, the current is so strong that it blows light bulbs, and harms precious fridges, freezers and television sets.

Many appliances are available to smooth out the uneven supply. Most homes rely on voltage regulators, surge protectors and rechargeable lamps. Back-up power systems are also becoming increasingly common.

In this environment, electricity gains qualities. It can be weak or strong, smooth or rough, calm or temperamental, benign or dangerous.



Image # 2. Top: Voltage stabiliser connected to a fridge. Middle: Extension block with a voltage gauge; electrical cabinet. Bottom: Inverter connected to a car battery

A Generator Dominion

It is estimated there are around 60 million generators in Nigeria. With a population of about 140 million, this gives a ratio of one generator per 2.5 inhabitants. This makes Nigeria the most generator-dependent country in the world.

When cheap generators from China were introduced a few years ago, they received the nickname 'I pass my neighbour.' Now they cost less than US\$60, and the majority of households have access to one.



Image # 3: Ezekiel with his generators.

'Nepa don Come!' – Power has Come!

The sudden, and temporary, availability of power announces itself by the sound of dormant refrigerators, fans and radios coming to life. People immediately rush to do whatever task needs to be done while there is power. The comings and goings of electricity create local outbursts of activity and set the rhythm of the city.

Many homes also have a naked light bulb permanently attached to the main line, to let them know when there is power on the grid. Electricity supplied through the official network is called 'Nepa,' which is the abbreviation for the National Electric Power Authority. Hence the exclamation 'Nepa don come!', which means 'Nepa has come!'

Image # 4: Light bulb signalling that the electrical grid has power.

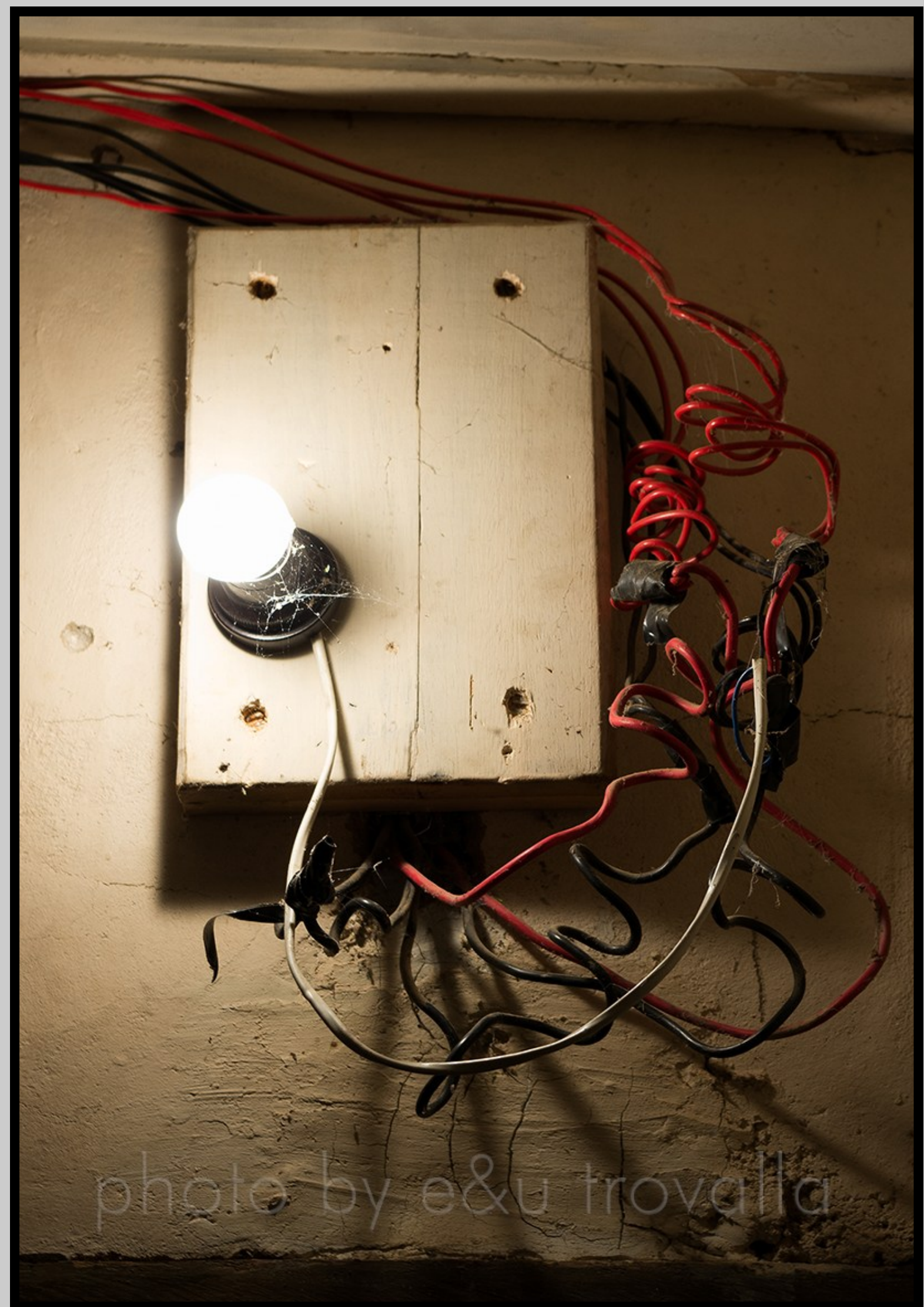


photo by e&u trovalla

Connecting the Dots

In a very literal sense, wires, pipes, roads and radio waves connect the individual with society. Being connected – or cut off – from networks of electricity, water, sewage, traffic, telecommunications, etc., is a way to experience what it means to be a citizen.

When the power fails, the pipes are dry, the roads are blocked and the telephone searches in vain for reception, people lose trust in public institutions.

As people turn to private means such as generators, illegal power tapping, black market fuel, etc., some interpret the situation as a weakening of social ties. Where, they ask, does that leave Nigeria as a nation, with a common future?



Image # 5: In the settling dusk, a shopkeeper has turned on his generator to light up his store, while the rest of the street is gradually enveloped in the descending darkness.

A Geography of Lack

The search for firewood, petrol, cellphone signals etc., takes people on journeys throughout the city, and during these excursions they reinterpret the significance of areas, explore new paths, encounter new obstacles and devise new ways around them. These myriad individual acts continually transform the city, physically as well as conceptually, and create the need for renewed efforts of exploration.



Image # 6: Women carrying firewood

Tracing the Signs of Infrastructure

People carefully trace the signs and clues relating to the infrastructure. When will the power come back on? When will petrol be available again? Inventing and exchanging elaborate theories about these questions is an intrinsic part of everyday life in Jos. Guesswork about the logic of petrol distribution and power shedding becomes a recurring topic of conversation. Some claim to have seen schedules from the power company, but they never seem to materialise in real life. Rumours of petrol stations expected to receive fuel deliveries frequently result in kilometre-long queues, which last for days.

Understanding these processes is not just a game or a matter of idle conversation – failures to read the signs properly can lead to loss of business and salaries, while bad fuel and power spikes can lead to engine breakdowns or devastating fires.



photo by e&u trovalla

Image # 7. Top: When fuel vendors have goods to sell, they announce the fact with signboards declaring, 'Yes fuel.' Bottom: A desolate filling station waiting for the next delivery.

Time and Infrastructure

Through the prism of infrastructure, people see the past, present and future of Jos, and of Nigeria at large.

Many recall the early days of independence after 1960, when the future was bright. Water flowed through all the pipes, electricity was constant and the public transport vehicles did not look as though they were falling apart.

A defining moment in the nation's history was the oil boom of the 1970s, when prosperity and credibility peaked. This era saw extensive investment in infrastructure. Another defining moment was the oil bust of the 1980s, when the price of crude plummeted. In Nigeria, the order of the day became broken dreams and systemic failure.

Since then, resignation has fused with dark humour into a brand of national pessimism. The acronym NEPA, the National Electric Power Authority, is commonly spelled out as 'Never Expect Power Always.' When NEPA was renamed PHCN – The Power Holding Company of Nigeria – people referred to it as 'Problem Has Changed Name.'



Image # 8. Top: An old electricity meter from Nepa. Bottom: The electricity meter sits next to a lever that switches between electricity from Nepa and from the generator.

Patterns in the Sky

A jumble of wires draws patterns in the sky. Some are phone lines that are no longer in use. Others are power lines. The illegal attachments are numerous – they might even outnumber the legal attachments. In some areas, illegal connections make up their own unofficial and uncharted networks.

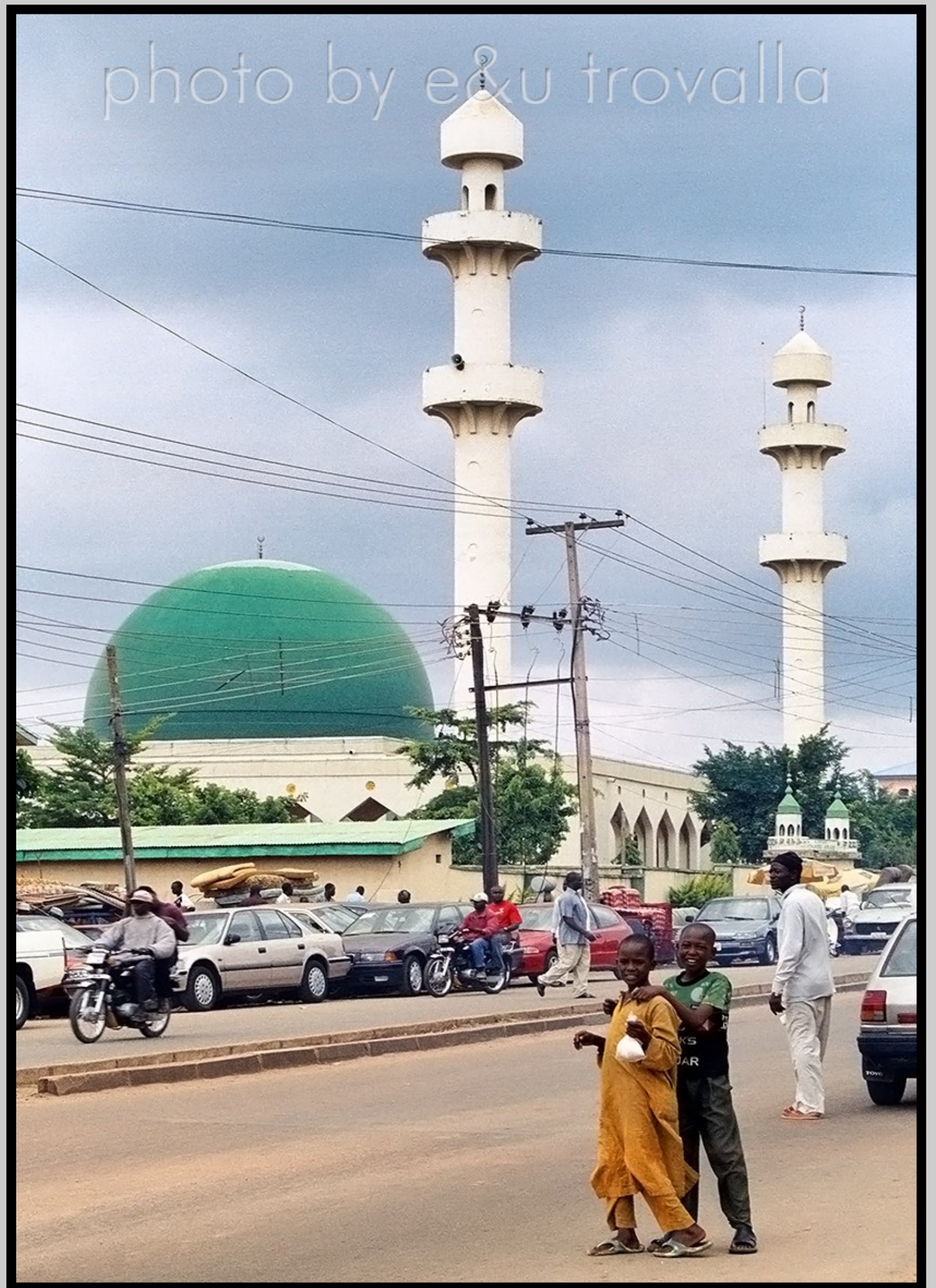


Image # 9: Untraceable wires connect to the main line.

Claiming the City

Infrastructure has become associated with the increasing tensions between Christians and Muslims. Who belongs in Jos? Entire areas, including major roads, are now forbidden zones for people who do not belong to the majority of a specific area. People interpret the significance of who can – and cannot – travel along certain roads, and which areas have electricity when others are dark. Rumours of poisoned wells or of plans to cut off certain areas from the water supply circulate in the city.

Image # 10: The main mosque in Jos.



'Keke Napep'

The Plateau State government has recently banned motorcycle taxis from the city, claiming that the fast-moving vehicles undermine stability and security. Given that most drivers were Muslims, and the political elite in the region are mainly Christian, these bans have been interpreted as attempts to restrict the movements of certain people, as well as deprive them of the economic means to remain in the city.

To keep the traffic in the city flowing, 300 tricycles – called 'Keke Napep' in Nigeria – were imported from India. Interested drivers could purchase them from the state government and pay in instalments. But many former motorcycle taxi drivers feel that the new vehicles are first and foremost given to Christians.



Image # 11: A Keke Napep in traffic.

Infrastructure as a Sign of Peace and Upheaval

Over the last decade, Jos has seen much violence. Rivalry between ethnic and religious groups has resulted in devastating clashes, and thousands of lives have been lost.

People have developed skills in reading the signs that are embedded in the rhythms of traffic. Vehicles passing at normal speed, and taxi cabs and buses sounding their horns in their tell-tale way when looking for passengers, inform people that things are calm in the city. If there are no cars on an otherwise busy street, people know that trouble has broken out.



Image # 12: As an outcome of the tension between Christians and Muslims, many cars carry religious symbols, indicating an increasingly divided city.

Obasanjo Ya Kasa

– ‘Obasanjo Failed’

photo by e&u trovalla



In 2007, a crudely made battery-operated lamp consisting of LEDs, with a used CD as a reflector, suddenly flooded the street markets throughout Nigeria.

The lamp proved to be a valuable invention. Affordable and effective, it offered light during the dark hours. To mock the president who had promised to resolve the energy situation, the lamp was dubbed ‘Obasanjo ya kasa,’ ‘Obasanjo failed.’

Image # 13: An ‘Obasanjo ya kasa’ lamp warding off the darkness.

Imported Replacement

Nowadays, the 'Obasanjo ya kasa' lamp is not common in the cities, where it has been replaced by cheap rechargeable lamps imported from China. However, in rural areas it still illuminates dark rooms.



photo by e&u trovalla

Image # 14: Rechargeable lamp imported from China.

A Space for New Possibilities

When systems fail, they also leave room for other ways of doing things, and that is how many people make their living.

The perpetual state of infrastructural crisis brings forth its own mode of cultural production. New inventions are made and existing technology is reassigned. Dead wires become clotheslines, refrigerators become rat-proof cupboards and the GSM system becomes an alternative banking system. Traffic jams become bustling marketplaces. All these new uses rely on the very fact that things seem to be deteriorating.



Image # 15: Clotheslines

The Backbone of the City

If fuel distribution worked as intended, hundreds of black market petrol vendors would be out of their jobs. The many small businesses that sell generators, inverters, surge protectors, rechargeable lamps and batteries, depend on the irregular power supply. Likewise, government-employed traffic directors would not be standing in the junctions if the traffic lights had electricity.

Several services related to infrastructure are performed by what is called the informal sector. Many people, especially children, work on the roads, filling potholes or warning of dangerous obstacles. For their services, they get the occasional 'dash' – a small amount of money – from passing drivers. In the city, many junctions are manned by teenage boys who direct traffic, also for dash. Many other children earn money by picking recyclables from the garbage.

Parallel and informal systems are often seen as redundant and parasitic, and interventions to promote development frequently entail efforts to 'clean-up' these alternative systems. However, this can lead to further marginalisation of the most vulnerable groups, as access to formal systems often requires high initial costs, as well as recognised citizenship, registered home address, employment, etc.

For many, the parallel and informal systems are the only source of vital necessities. *They form the backbone of everyday life in the city.*



Image # 16: Black market petrol



Image # 17: Black market petrol vendors